

## LANGUAGE HISTORY

**Understanding Shakespeare's English**

We call the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries Early Modern English. Much of Shakespeare's vocabulary is still in use today. However, he also uses many words or forms of words that have since gone out of use. His sentences are often put together in ways that are slightly different from the ways of current American English. Word order is often slightly different from what we expect today. Here are some features of Shakespeare's English that soon become familiar to the reader:

(1) Shakespeare uses some personal pronouns that have become **archaic**. In speaking to *one* other person, Shakespeare's characters sometimes use *you* and *your*, as we would today. "Why have *you* left the chamber?") But often they use the older *thou*, with the additional forms *thee*, *thy*, and *thine*:

Didst *thou* not hear a noise?  
I see *thee* still.  
We are sent to give *thee* thanks.  
More is *thy* due.

Special archaic verb forms often go with *thou*:

Thou *shalt* beget kings.  
Thou *art* mad.  
Thou *knowest*.  
Where *hast* thou been?

In speaking to *several* other persons, a speaker sometimes use *ye* instead of *you*:

Are *ye* fantastical, or that indeed  
Which outwardly *ye* show?

(2) Other archaic verb forms survive in much of the dialogue:

he <i>hath</i> lost	(has)
it <i>seemeth</i>	(seems)
I have <i>spoke</i>	(spoken)
Macbeth <i>doth</i> come	(does)

(3) Uses of various auxiliaries or helping verbs differ somewhat from the way we use them today. In questions and negative statements, the characters sometimes use *do*, *does*, or *did* the way we would today. ("What *do* you mean?") But often these added words are missing, as they were in older forms of English:

I know not.	(I <i>do</i> not know.)
See you not?	( <i>Do</i> you not see?)
Dismayed not this our captains?	( <i>Did</i> this not dismay our captains?)
Goes Fleance with you?	( <i>Does</i> Fleance go with you?)

Often a verb alone is used where today we would expect an added *let* or *may*:

*Retire* we to our chamber. (*Let us retire to our chamber.*)  
so *please* you (*may it please you*)

The word *would* often means wish or want. *Were* is often used where today we would expect *would be*:

*Would* they had stayed! (*I wish they had stayed!*)  
Thou *wouldst* be great. (*You want to be great.*)  
Meeting *were* bare without it. (*A gathering would be bare without.*)

(4) Some familiar expressions occur over and over in the dialogue but have become archaic in modern English. Studying the following brief list will help you understand many of Shakespeare's lines:

<i>anon</i>	soon, right away	<i>maw</i>	stomach
<i>aught</i>	anything	<i>mettle</i>	courage
<i>aye</i>	always, ever	<i>naught, nought</i>	nothing
<i>betimes</i>	soon, early	<i>nigh</i>	near
<i>durst</i>	dared	<i>of late</i>	recently
<i>ere</i>	before	<i>prithee</i>	please
<i>fain</i>	gladly	<i>sooth</i>	truth
<i>forsooth</i>	truly	<i>quoth</i>	spoke, said
<i>hark</i>	listen	<i>sirrah</i>	boy, servant
<i>hence</i>	from here	<i>thither</i>	to that place
<i>hie</i>	hurry	<i>thrice</i>	three times
<i>hither</i>	(to) here	<i>twain</i>	two
<i>issue</i>	offspring	<i>were</i>	would be
<i>liege</i>	overlord	<i>whence</i>	from where
<i>like</i>	likely	<i>whither</i>	where to
<i>loath</i>	unwilling	<i>withal</i>	with, with this
<i>methinks</i>	I think	<i>within</i>	inside
<i>methought</i>	I thought	<i>without</i>	outside

How would you say each of the following in Modern English?

1. Didst thou not hear a noise?
2. Whither are they vanished?
3. So well the words become thee as thy wounds.
4. Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done it.
5. Hear it not, Duncan.
6. How goes the night?
7. I think not of them.
8. I wouldst thou hadst less deserved.
9. Hie thee hither.
10. I would thou couldst.
11. He hath honored me of late.
12. 'Tis most like the sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth.
13. Ride you this afternoon?
14. Fail not our feast.
15. Attend those men our pleasure?